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Developing religious literacy through popular culture fandom: engaging religious issues in *Fleabag* fan fiction

Andrew Crome 

ABSTRACT

This article analyses 120 fan-authored stories focusing on the character of the 'Hot Priest' in the television comedy *Fleabag* (BBC/Amazon 2016–2019), examining how fans use their fandom to explore religious issues and develop religious and theological literacy. This challenges the 'banality' of media representations of religion suggested by Stig Hjarvard's mediatisation thesis through exploring fan responses to a 'secular' television show. As they engage through fandom, fan authors participate in reflection on contemporary Catholic issues and discuss God's character and interpretations of Scripture. This is a form of 'serious play' that allows for detailed meditation on these subjects. Although fans' engagement with religious issues is not a reversal of the decline of religious affiliation in the West, it is a sign of the 'new visibility of religion' in which examples of both 'traditional' and new religion emerge in novel, and often unexpected, contexts.

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Introduction

Introducing Andrew Scott's 'Hot Priest', the 2019 series of the British comedy-drama *Fleabag* caused some unexpected spiritual interest, namely a 162% rise in searches for 'religious porn' (Snapes 2019). Yet it also led some fans to explore religion in other ways, discussing issues relating to calling, celibacy, and the Roman Catholic Church.¹ This article explores how fans engaged in discussions of religious ideas and controversies through fan-authored narratives. I suggest that fan engagement and connection with 'religious' characters in fiction can generate empathy for faith and debate about contemporary religious issues. In other words, popular culture can actively contribute to religious literacy.

Religious literacy is defined here as the comprehension of the ways in which different religious practitioners and communities understand their own traditions and use their beliefs and practices when engaging those outside their

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traditions. Developing religious literacy does not aim to convert non-practitioners or to lead them to agree with the internal ethical or political positions of groups. Rather, it aims to make them familiar with the logics of traditions, enabling understanding of practitioners. This form of engagement is important not just for students and teachers of religious studies, but also for those dealing with faith groups in the public sphere (Gallagher 2009, 219–220).

This article examines 120 English-language *Fleabag* stories posted between April 2019 and September 2020 to the open access “Archive of Our Own”, a “fan-created, fan-run, nonprofit, noncommercial archive for transformative fanworks, like fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, and podfic”, hosting over 6.8 million works covering over 40,000 different fandoms (Organisation for Transformative Works 2020). Authors of the stories identified themselves mainly as coming from Britain, the United States, Italy, Germany, and Scandinavia. The stories were read closely and were annotated and key themes were identified and coded. The authors’ screen names were subsequently anonymised. The research received ethical approval from the Ethics Review Board at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Building on recent work on “Hijabi cosplay” (Gittinger 2018, 2019), Christian fan fiction (Crome 2014, 2019), and evangelical punk (Abraham 2017, 2020), this article suggests ways in which fans use fandom to develop religious literacy. As they engage, fans reflect on contemporary religious issues. Although religious affiliation has declined markedly in Britain since the 1960s (Brown 2019, 8–14; Davie 2015, 41–66), this does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in religion. Fan authors’ engagement with religious themes is therefore a sign of the “new visibility of religion” (Hoelzl and Ward 2008, 1–11; Hjelm 2015, 10–11) in which examples of both ‘traditional’ and new religion emerge in novel, and often unexpected, contexts. The aim of this article is not merely to demonstrate that popular culture is a site in which religious options are explored and views developed, which is a well-established position (e.g. Cusack and Kosnác 2017; Forbes and Mahan 2017; Cusack and Robertson 2019). This article develops this by examining how fandom encourages deeper empathetic knowledge and engagement with a particular religious tradition, rather than focusing on the way it affects individual religious practice. This suggests that popular culture might further deepen understandings of religious groups within the wider public sphere. While previous work has emphasised the links between fantasy, science fiction, and supernatural fandom with religious exploration and experience (e.g. Clark 2003; Petersen 2010; Davidsen 2016; Cusack and Robertson 2019), this article concentrates on comedy drama without any explicit supernatural content. It thus suggests ways in which multiple *genres* can develop fans’ perspectives of religion. After outlining the current discussion of popular culture’s ability to engage audiences with religious ideas, this article will discuss fan fiction as a vector of religious literacy, drawing on specific examples from *Fleabag* fandom.

Religious literacy and popular culture

The emergence of national and global media has often been seen as a key element of Weberian disenchanted modernity. Some have therefore viewed the media as both a mirror to and a driving force of contemporary secularisation. Here, new media forms, particularly television, appear too shallow to portray religion accurately, due to the fast-moving nature of image-based entertainment and its role in fostering low attention spans (Postman 1986, 114–124). According to Stig Hjarvard, religion communicated by media is susceptible to becoming ‘mediatised’. Not only do media themselves become ‘authorities’ and a chief conduit for religious education, they also inevitably simplify presentations of faith traditions. Although popular culture might engage with religious themes, it uses religion in a ‘banal’ way. Drawn from studies of ‘banal nationalism’, the term suggests that religious images and symbols in the media serve primarily as background, detached from their institutional structures. For example, religious imagery may appear to reinforce ideas of exoticism or tradition, depending on how producers employ them (Hjarvard 2008, 9–11, 2011, 127–130, 2012, 34–40). Although this is not intended as a “pejorative term suggesting a lack of religious importance” (Hjarvard 2012, 36; Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019, 210), it can nonetheless imply that religious themes are little more than set dressing (Axelson 2015, 151–153). Relabelling ‘banal religion’ as ‘popular religion’, Knut Lundby et al. note that these representations are generally analysed in the literature as “taken out of [their] traditional setting and decontextualized” (2018, 211). In becoming detached from wider belief systems, such representations remain interesting illustrations of contemporary forms of faith as it develops, but encourage little engagement with institutional religion. Indeed, they often challenge traditional religious viewpoints. (ibid) From this perspective, fan fiction produced in response to already shallow presentations of a particular religious tradition would amplify this effect. Religious ideas and practices may appear, but the medium further simplifies them.

Criticisms of both the concept of ‘banal religion’ and the wider mediatisation thesis have emphasised that the concept potentially homogenises religious institutions by ignoring the multiplicity of views within them (Lied 2012, 192–194). As Mia Lövheim notes (2012, 132–133), this risks overlooking the role of both organisational and individual agency in shaping and responding to religious material in the media: this may lead to an encounter with decontextualised religious images that viewers ignore or alternatively prompt further investigation by committed viewers. Indeed, such representations, particularly when presented within a recognized institutional structure, may not be decontextualised at all. Audience response must therefore play a role in investigations of the mediatisation of religion (Lundby 2018, 300–302).

Michael Saler has described fandoms as “public spheres of the imagination”, allowing debate of controversial issues within safe and supportive spaces (2012, 16). Fan works are ‘serious play’, allowing for engagement with important issues through communities formed around popular culture. Similarly, in interviewing fans of *Avatar* and *Pulp Fiction*, Thomas Axelson found that they employed complex religious readings of the films, leading him to suggest that discussions of ‘banal religion’ misrepresent what is actually “vernacular meaning making” (2015, 154). As Christopher Partridge noted in his examination of contemporary meaning making and the sacred, “just because beliefs are transmitted through popular culture does not mean they are, therefore, trivialized” (2006, 2).

Collaboration and mentorship allow fans to develop new literacies. Rebecca Black (2008, 10–17) shows how fan fiction authors shared historical and cultural research, helped those learning English, and developed *genre* literacy in their online spaces (see also Leigh 2020; Dariva 2021). Henry Jenkins (2006, 171–176) argues that fan spaces teach fans how to evaluate different ethical systems and develop media literacy. Indeed, fan fiction communities generally display a supportive ethos that aims to mentor members and build skills (Aragon and Davis 2019; Jenkins 2019).² More recently, Jenkins, Sangita Shreshtova, and Gabriel Peters-Lazaro have suggested that participatory media culture fosters ‘civic literacies’, teaching about activism, the political imagination, and civic agency (2020). This, in turn, suggests that fan fiction communities might be productive sites for developing religious literacy, as fans use their fandom to engage with issues of faith (Crome 2019, 138).

Religious literacy is important in a contemporary context. Despite declining affiliation to religious institutions in Europe and North America, public controversies surrounding religious beliefs and practices continue to appear. As Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme notes, declining numbers of adherents can equate with increased social conflict (2016, 177). As potential flashpoints emerge, it becomes ever more important to understand the positions of religious actors.

Stephen Prothero defines religious literacy as “the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life” (2007, 13). As Eugene Gallagher points out, however, this is not enough. Religious literacy must move beyond knowledge of institutions and practices in order to be useful in individual interactions and the broader public sphere—it requires an understanding of *how* and *why* religious people engage in certain practices and form their worldviews (Gallagher 2009, 208). Part of this includes the development of familiarity with different traditions and their adherents (Jacobsen and Jacobsen 2012, 65–68).

Familiarity does not mean merely knowing *about* religion, but an ability to enter imaginatively practitioners’ worldviews. While this is primarily applicable

to the ethnographer, it is also evident in fan fiction when authors engage with religious beliefs, practices, and traditions in order to create their works. In promoting what Saler calls an ‘as if approach’ to their fandom, fans imaginatively explore the experiences of characters and worlds alien to their own, creating empathy and understanding for different positions (Saler 2012, 7; Clark 2003, 136–138). For example, fan fiction based on the demon-hunting show *Supernatural* helped fans develop new perspectives on Satan and launched discussions of Christian history (Kienzl 2014, 76–79). Christian authors writing *My Little Pony* fan fiction used established characters as a way of introducing and discussing theological concepts through their stories (Crome 2019, 137–138). While these examples developed from fantasy series, the same interest in religious issues emerges in fandoms based on more grounded scenarios. Here, examining fan fiction surrounding the Priest in *Fleabag* demonstrates how fans came to empathetic understandings of faith through writing the character, leading to increased religious literacy. This suggests that viewing portrayals of religion in popular culture as shallow and conceptualising fan communities as inherently secular spaces risks overlooking the nuance in both the presentation and the reception of religion in popular media. This is not a re-emergence of religion or a reversal of secularisation, but part of a wider culture in which religious themes become increasingly visible in new, and different, ways. Examining how this new visibility appears in different contexts offers opportunities to understand the complex ways in which different religious symbols and traditions are understood outside their original contexts.

***Fleabag* and fan fiction**

Fleabag (BBC/Amazon) was a critically acclaimed comedy drama that ran for two series between 2016 and 2019, starring creator and writer Phoebe Waller-Bridge as the title character. Fleabag (only ever identified by her nickname) is vivacious, sexually promiscuous, and troubled, contending with the deaths of her mother and best friend, a difficult family, and guilt over failed relationships. The second series won BAFTA, Emmy, and Golden Globe awards and introduced Andrew Scott as the ‘Hot Priest’. The two characters fell in love, although *Fleabag* ended with his choosing the Church over her, despite a brief sexual liaison.

Fleabag’s second series generated an increased fan base which translated into a growing body of fan fiction (Luckhurst 2019). While *Fleabag* aired, fans wrote stories featuring possible endings, filling in gaps in the backstory, and debating the plot. With *Fleabag*’s conclusion, fans continued to write, sometimes composing ‘fix-it fic’, offering a happier ending to the show (Fanlore.org 2021), sometimes continuing the story or placing characters in alternative timelines (Duffett 2013, 170–171).

Fleabag's themes opened up the possibility of engagement with religious issues. Many fan authors undertake meticulous historical and cultural research in the interests of accuracy (Black 2008, 90–94). When writing the Priest, this necessitated understanding Catholic clerical ethics and debates within the Catholic Church. This linked to investment in the protagonists. As in many fandoms, affective engagement is central (Grossberg 1992, 54–61) and *Fleabag* fans continued writing due to their affective connections to its characters. Although some authors reimagine characters' circumstances, many prefer to remain consistent with established characterisations due to their strong feelings for them (Becque 2012, 145; Wilson 2016). Characters become "a shared resource that the whole community of that fandom feels it knows and cares about" (Pugh 2005, 67).

These affective connections make *Fleabag* fan fiction interesting for examining religious discourse. As Lynn Scofield Clark argues, popular culture offers a "structure of feeling" that allows fans to discuss challenging and emotive issues (2003, 12–14). The centrality of the Priest and fans' felt connection to him, his faith, and the need to address it when writing all made some form of religious engagement likely in fans' work. This connection can transform seemingly abstract points of theology or practice into emotionally resonant concerns that translate from the world of the series into the fans' own lives. This is not to claim that fans individually feel the emotional impact of the Priest considering whether celibacy is required of him by God as a one-to-one identification, but that this once obscure point of clerical ethics now becomes emotionally resonant. Existing feelings for characters and their personal concerns can broaden into fans empathising and understanding faith perspectives that once appeared alien to them (Crome 2019, 145).

From one perspective, it might appear that religious content in *Fleabag* serves merely as scaffolding for its plot. The Catholic background might represent a 'banal' representation of faith, in which actual religious elements hardly play a role beyond offering an exotic veneer to the story (Hjarvard 2008, 9–11, 2011, 127–130). From this perspective, *Fleabag* fan fiction might touch on religious topics, but would be unlikely to scratch beneath the surface of the issues involved. Yet faith is important within *Fleabag*'s narrative. Characters are both respectful and bemused by the Priest's faith, yet religion is never mere window dressing. While his unobtainable nature makes him more tempting to *Fleabag*, at the same time, his faith is vibrant, grounded in God, Church, and community. Producers' and actors' research on, and respect for, faithful Catholic clergy (and awareness of clergy shortcomings) was evident in promotional interviews (Pollard 2019; Robinson 2019). Fan fiction shows the same concern. Although the majority of fan writers are neither practising Catholics nor profess to come from a Christian background, they are sympathetic to the Priest's faith, their work delving deeply into the reasons for his dedication.

This was not the case for all the authors and the Euro-American background of most meant that they were likely familiar with other popular depictions of Catholicism on screen (see McDannell 2008, 9–16; Payne 2015, 423–426; Wolff 2010, 3–9). Indeed, fans (of all faiths and none) are playful in their writing (Hoover 2006, 275–276). Given *Fleabag*'s subject matter and the traditions of fan fiction as an outlet for sexualised readings of favourite characters, many of the stories available in the fandom are sexually explicit. This is true not only of stories that authors label 'smut', but also for more detailed character pieces which often include sexual scenes.³

Yet this does not make them any less valuable as examples of religious engagement. As Carole Cusack and Venetia Robertson note, ignoring discussions of faith simply due to playfulness overlooks the extent to which they reveal important elements of the contemporary religious scene (Cusack and Robertson 2019, 6–7). These discussions encourage fan empathy for believers and reflection on the nature of the lived religious experience of others. Although 'religious' fiction can aim to attract converts, this impulse is far from universal.⁴ As Heather Hendershot (2004, 3) and Paul Creasman (2013, 219) have suggested, even explicitly evangelical media aim to start conversations rather than achieve outright conversion. This is also true of writers of faith-based fan fiction when written to evangelize (Crome 2019, 134). Consequently, this article does not argue that *Fleabag* fan fiction represents an opportunity for Catholic proselytization. Instead, it allows fans to develop understandings of Catholicism beyond on-screen depictions, leading to the potential for greater dialogue outside the fan community.

Celibacy: Catholicism, Anglicanism, and criticism

Given *Fleabag*'s central romantic pairing, it is unsurprising that authors address Catholicism and its relationship with other religious organisations. The Priest's celibacy is both key to the plot and a Catholic distinctive, making this an obvious area of interest.⁵ Stories examine a variety of religious positions, including Anglicanism as an alternative pathway for the Priest, and research internal debates within the Catholic Church. Authors therefore engage with contemporary Catholic controversies, developing religious literacy as it relates to current disputes around the issue.

Debates on celibacy, along with contraception, have been the cause of major disputes among British Catholics, particularly since Pope Paul VI's reaffirmation of clerical celibacy in 1967 and the following year's *Humane Vitae* (McLeod 2007, 189–194; Harris 2020). This has remained a live issue in recent years for lay Catholics (Bullivant 2016, 186–188; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016, 174). Stephen Loudon and Leslie Francis's analysis of their survey of English and Welsh priests of 1996–1997 demonstrates that the same is true of the clergy (2003, 85–88, 95–98, 203–208).⁶

In some stories, the Church's stance is criticised directly. This is unsurprising when authors deliver more fan-pleasing endings, as the only way for the Priest and Fleabag to remain together would be for him to leave the priesthood. Here, we might expect writers to embrace Fleabag's atheism, dismissing the Priest's belief as overly restrictive and psychologically damaging. However, none of the stories examined here included this outcome. Author I's "Advent" (11 June 2019), for example, ends with the Priest leaving the Church, but explicitly reaffirming his faith. In answer to Fleabag's question whether he has now chosen her over God, he responds:

No, it's you and God. It's just that I no longer believe that He would bring you into my life just to test my faith and make me prove my love for Him. That would be a really f***d up and controlling thing to do, and I don't believe He is any of those things.

Similarly, Author B's "Names Define Us" has Fleabag wonder why the Church cannot allow the Priest to love both God and her: "Love was not a sordid affair, love was a gift of God." (26 September 2019) Author L's "Divinity" (3 March 2020) has God bemoaning the Church's internal regulations:

Celibacy. Who had come up with that, anyway? Weren't priests supposed to spread His word? And at the core of that was ... Love, for God's sake! (It was okay, He could be blasphemous Himself if He wanted to.) *Love each other*, His son had died to tell them. (Emphasis in original)

Author P's "Maybe I Will Live to Love" (25 August 2019) finds the Priest visiting his bishop in order to confess his attraction to Fleabag. Instead of condemnation, the bishop suggests he examine whether his decision to remain celibate could be distancing him from God: "The bishop rapped his knuckles on the hardwood desk, punctuating his point: 'Faith and love go hand in hand—they do not subtract, but multiply in the presence of the other. Forsake one, and the other shall surely suffer.'"

A common way of resolving the issue comes through a conversion to Anglicanism. In Author J's "A Special Day of Mourning", set 15 years after the end of the series, the (now Anglican) Priest explains: "A different denomination of Christianity would allow me to marry you." (4 April 2020) In "Names Define Us", Fleabag imagines the Priest enjoying the life of a married cleric and he agrees to consider joining the Church of England (Author B, 26 September 2019). Author E's "How Do You Spell Love?" finds him promising that he will leave the priesthood and "look into Anglicanism" (11 October 2019). Meanwhile, in Author A's "Faith and Sex", the Priest details Church of England attitudes towards clerical marriage, women priests, and same sex relationships to Fleabag to her general approval (24 September 2019).

Other stories linked to contemporary discussions within Catholicism. In October 2019, a synod of Latin American bishops suggested to Pope Francis

that married men serving as deacons in remote areas of the Amazon might be ordained as priests (Puellella 2019). This prompted several stories. Author F's "Only Read the Headline" is a light-hearted reaction to *The Wall Street Journal's* reporting of the news, as the Priest rushes to Fleabag's flat to have sex on hearing of it. When she asks for details on the Pope's statement afterwards, he laughs: "I have no idea... I only read the headline." (9 October 2019) While not an in-depth analysis of the question of celibacy (nor intended as one), the story allows readers to discover more of the issues in play through a hyperlink to the *Journal's* coverage (Rocca 2019).

Author E's "What's a Cool Pope?" has Fleabag reading the news and visiting the Priest to encourage him to restart their relationship. Dialogue includes a detailed unpacking of papal thinking on the subject and limitations of the plans. As with many of the stories, there is nonetheless a happy ending: "The newspaper headline caught [the Priest's] eye, 'POPE CHANGES MIND ON CELIBACY', he laughed to himself. The Pope definitely hadn't, but he had." (15 November 2019) Not all stories recognized the complexities of the issue. Some, for example, presumed that the Pope had waived celibacy and allowed marriage. Even here, however, Fleabag appears obsessively researching the issue online. (Author T, "If Misery Loves Company, They Must Love Me", 19 December 2019)

Similar to the discussions of celibacy, some stories drew on contemporary coverage of clerical scandals. In "Advent" (Author I, 11 June 2019), Fleabag's friend Belinda acts as a confidante regarding her relationship with the Priest. Belinda introduces a controversy surrounding staff at a Vatican women's magazine who had resigned in anger after breaking a sex scandal involving priests. Within the story's diegesis, Belinda emails Fleabag a link to a *Daily Telegraph* article on the resignations (Squires 2019). Its inclusion as hypertext within the narrative encourages readers to access the article and explore the controversy in detail themselves.

Other stories refer to contemporary scandals without this level of specificity. Author A's "Faith and Sex" (24 September 2019) finds the Priest leaving the Church after discovering that his bishop was covering for a parishioner who had raped several women. In "A Special Day of Mourning", the Priest admits that, when he found himself unable to advise a young congregant that same-sex attraction was wrong, he felt compelled to leave Catholicism: "I couldn't in all good faith follow the teachings of the Catholic church and stay true to what I believe." (Author J, 4 April 2020) Both reading and writing fan fiction therefore draws non-Catholic fans to imagine themselves as sympathetic participants in existing intra-Catholic debates.

In these examples, popular media operate in ways that challenge the mediatisation of religion thesis. The presence of religious issues within *Fleabag* leads to discussion on the nature of faith, understanding of internal church disputes, and engagement in contemporary religious controversies.

Arguments that popular media primarily display ‘banal’ representations, in which religion is reduced to a “taken-for granted” (Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019, 210) backdrop, can be challenged by the engagement displayed in these stories. This can also extend beyond discussions of contemporary issues, into a sympathetic understanding of personal faith.

Faith and characterisation

Concerns about characterisation provide one reason why authors chose not to have the Priest abandon his faith. While fan fiction plays with characters’ settings and circumstances, the majority of stories maintain their central attributes in order to make them recognizable and appealing to readers as ‘our’ characters (Pugh 2005, 69–89; Williams 2015, 45–56). An abandonment of belief would be inconsistent with the Priest’s strong faith, established within the show as part of his appeal to Fleabag. In stories where he leaves the priesthood, he is clear that he maintains his belief. In “A Special Day of Mourning”, he emphasises that he lost faith, although “Not in God, not in Him, but in the word of the Catholic church” (Author J, 4 April 2020). After making love to Fleabag in “Faith and Sex”, he simply tells her to “f*** off” when she asks whether he now loves her more than God (Author A, 24 September 2019).

These stories emphasise the importance and transformative nature of personal belief to the Priest. Faith, especially God’s love, appears as a key part of his identity. When laicised in Author H’s “Peace is Overrated”, he tells Fleabag that “they can’t take God from me, can’t strip him from my heart” (15 March 2020). Author S’s “Sorrow and Salvation” (12 April 2020) records the Priest’s joy in pastoral duties:

He *did* love helping out his parishioners, providing a comforting ear to those in need, praying with those who needed hope or a boost to their faith. He loved spending his time analysing scriptures, he loved how new interpretations could surprise him, how he could re-read a certain passage and find something completely new and joyous jumping out of the text. (Emphasis in original)

As fan fiction often fills gaps in the canonical narrative (Jenkins 2013, 162–177), some stories examine the Priest’s life before conversion and the development of his faith. In Author I’s “Awake” (17 April 2019), he reflects on the effects of his conversion:

It had been so beautiful, so soothing, to step out of the world and devote himself to the divine. To stop viewing every woman he saw as a potential conquest and to focus on how he could help them spiritually, to show them how God’s love could bring them peace and stability as it had to him.

“Lover Man (Oh Where Can You Be?)” imagines the Priest’s childhood in an abusive family and his experience of answered prayer as chaplain at a

children's hospital (Author C, 9 January 2020). "Sorrow and Salvation" similarly recounts his escape from abusive parents, descent to promiscuous alcoholism, and conversion through meditating on "*the teachings of love, forgiveness and hope*" (Author S, 12 April 2020, emphasis in original).

Fleabag both destabilises the Priest's sense of God's love and works to restore it. In one story, he describes her as "a dark mirror to the peace I feel before God; like she pulls me into some sort of balance" (Author I, "Falling", 29 September 2019). In others, the mirroring effect works the opposite way, introducing Fleabag to some understanding of the divine. When the Priest looks at her "like she's something glorious and precious" in Author Q's "Benediction" (12 December 2019), she experiences a sudden theophany:

Something in her clicks, like two gears finally hooking into place. She understands something, just as she steps back into her own body and rejoins the her that's teetering on the edge of an emotional sinkhole. *Oh*, she thinks as she settles back in to [sic] her body, wrestling herself away from the sharp edges of herself, *I think I understand God*. (Emphasis in original)

At times, this expands to Fleabag revealing God to the Priest. In Author N's "A Multitude of Sins" (2 January 2020), he admits that he has stopped hearing God's voice. In response, she offers him reflections on divine love:

"So maybe God's love for you"—I can't believe I'm saying this—"is Him loving you the best way He can." I swallow. "And maybe it actually really hurts Him that you can't feel it." It sounds like a lot of sh***, but it feels true.

That these writers refuse simply to validate Fleabag's atheism is not evidence of an absence of scepticism towards religion from the authors themselves. The key factor is more likely a desire to maintain consistency with existing characterisations. Abandoning belief would undermine the sincerity that helped make the Priest so popular. Nonetheless, the fact that maintaining his faith necessitates that writers engage with Catholic politics, and the relationship between carnal and divine love, means that these issues appear in stories and fan discussion around them. Fans therefore became more familiar with the language and arguments surrounding these topics, bolstering their religious literacy and ability to empathise with believers regardless of their own personal viewpoints. These discussions demonstrate that fans can imaginatively position themselves as religious practitioners, leading to sympathetic engagement with faith traditions other than their own.

Engaging Scripture

As noted above, fans often engage in detailed research into the historical, political, and social contexts of the characters they write. While popular portrayals of fan fiction often depicted it as shallow, work in fan studies over the past 30 years has emphasised the intellectual and literary quality of much

fan fiction (Kaplan 2006, 134–135; Pugh 2005, 143–168; Stasi 2006, 115–118). Arguing that fan works should be taken seriously does not ignore that fun and play are central elements in fan fiction’s appeal and not every story displays (or aims to display) intellectual or aesthetic depth. Nonetheless, fans looking for deeper engagement with issues can find stories catering to their preferences.

The use of Anglicanism as an explanation for the Priest’s departure from Catholicism led some writers to research theological differences between the two denominations. Again, character and author reflected one another in their research practices. In “Advent” (Author I, 11 June 2019), Fleabag and the Priest discuss differences between Catholic and Protestant positions after “she’s spend [sic] quite a bit of time Googling the history of clerical celibacy”. In “A Special Day of Mourning”, the Priest emphasises that the Anglican position on marriage springs from Scripture rather than tradition. The Church of England would allow the couple “to celebrate our love, there’s nothing in the bible to say that we shouldn’t” (Author J, 4 April 2020).

The importance of the Bible is another common theme. Several stories frame their narratives with scriptural quotations. “Lover Man” opens with Jeremiah 17:14 (“Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise”), a verse that reflects its story of spiritual healing in the Priest’s conversion. “A Multitude of Sins” begins with 1 Peter 4:8 (“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins”), reflecting the redemptive love the Priest finds in both Fleabag and God. “Salvation” by Author M (11 April 2020) quotes Psalm 73:25 (“Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you”) to refer to the Priest’s love for both Fleabag and God.

Returning to the mediatisation thesis, the use of Scripture might initially appear a textbook example of ‘banal religion’. As the fact that many stories are titled after popular songs suggests, decontextualised quotations are common in fan fiction. However, authors selected these verses with care. They used the Bible to highlight narrative themes and tensions within their work. Characters actively discuss and debate Scripture and their understanding of God using these examples. In Author K’s “If I Told You I Could Give You Life” (30 December 2019), for example, the Priest quotes Psalms to explain his sense of vocation. In describing his hopes to Fleabag after leaving the Church, he notes:

“... if I’m not going to be in the Church, that is—I want to do something that gives back to the community. I want—I want to make a difference. Somehow. You know, Psalm 146: 5–9.”

I cock an eyebrow.

He recites, and as he talks, his voice drops into this beautiful cadence: “Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—he remains faithful forever...”

At other times, Scripture is a cause of tension between the characters. In “Love is Awful” (Author R, 22 May 2019), Fleabag teases the Priest about the prohibitions against mixing fabrics in Leviticus and Paul’s admonition against women teaching in 1 Timothy 2:12 (“Have you been memorising bits of the bible just to annoy me?”, he asks).

Writing God

At times, authors choose to involve God directly in the narrative. In *Fleabag* itself, God is a silent presence, often described as the Priest’s ‘invisible friend’. Nonetheless, the series is not dismissive of the divine, with several incidents (particularly providential warnings to the Priest about his conduct) raising the possibility of God’s direct intervention in events (Crome 2020). This opens up space for God’s appearance in fan fiction.

While fans’ affection for characters, or desires to ‘fix’ the show’s narrative, can motivate their writing, they also write stories to gift to others, featuring preferred characters and scenarios (e.g. Yuletide celebrations; see Wilson 2016) or in response to general challenges or prompts issued to a writing community. In December 2019, a prompt suggested authors examine Fleabag and the Priest from God’s viewpoint. This provided a way to expand the characters’ story further and delve into its theological implications.

In Author F’s “Not in My House” (5 October 2019), God sends a number of providential signs to the Priest, including several conversations about Anglicanism. Eventually, he speaks directly, telling him to return to her. In “The Natural and the Divine”, God takes on a persona analogous to the show’s viewers: “He quite enjoyed following their relationship—its ups and downs and will-they and they-definitely-wills [sic]. And now it’s over.” Here, God becomes the fan author, as he works to ‘fix’ the couple’s separation. The author reflects on divine love, but this time from God’s viewpoint: “It breaks His heart. Sure, she may not believe in Him, but He doesn’t need people to believe to want the best for them.” (Author G, 25 December 2019) God expresses similar disapproval for the Priest’s behaviour in Author O’s “It Feels Like Hope”: “This, of all human misapprehensions, breaks my heart the most. Because what could I believe in more than love?” Interestingly, this story refuses to resolve the separation at the end of the series. Instead, God paraphrases Julian of Norwich: “This is grief, now. But in the end, it will be well.” (20 January 2020)

These stories aimed to entertain, not serve as theological treatise. Nonetheless, their authors reflected on the way God viewed love and the meaning of service, providence, and faith. Unavoidably, they strayed into the realm of theology, using popular culture to speculate on God’s character and will for individuals. Obviously, this does not presume the necessity of belief for either authors or readers, but it shows that even in ‘secular’ popular culture, theological contemplations about God’s character can emerge.

Conclusion

Hjarvard writes that the weakness of ‘banal religion’ is “the absence of coherent and elaborate religious propositions”, while its strength lies in its ability to “evoke emotions and support memory” (2011, 130). Although not intended to denigrate the significance or legitimacy of religious positions (Lövhelm and Hjarvard 2019, 210), the term nonetheless implies that religion in popular media lacks depth and risks overlooking the agency of media audiences. Research on individual meaning making in popular culture has demonstrated that this is not the case (e.g. Partridge 2006, 1–3; Forbes and Mahan 2017, 15–19; Cusack and Robertson 2019, 6–8). Exploring media portrayals of faith through participatory fandoms’ responses to them, as done here, allows this research to expand in new directions: to examine how fans develop religious literacy through empathetic engagement with their fandom. Following Lundby et al. (2018, 215–221), it suggests that the concept of ‘banal/popular’ religion within mediatisation theory need not lead to decontextualised religious content. In this case, a sympathetic character linked to a particular religious institution enabled fan engagement with Catholicism. This led to empathetic understanding of the faith positions of the characters they examined. This connection to characters acted as a gateway into the understanding of lived religious positions at a deeper level.

While this article focuses on Catholicism, its findings suggest future research avenues for fandoms that involve complex and sympathetic portrayals of other faiths. Considering how Marvel fan fiction engages with *Ms. Marvel* heroine Kamala Khan’s Islam, for example, would offer an interesting counterpart to this study. Likewise, further research might ask whether fans react to unsympathetic religious characters by internalising negative portrayals of particular traditions or whether they reimagine the faith of these characters through their research, leading to more positive narratives in fanworks.

Viewing religion in popular television as merely adding a veneer of either exoticism or traditionalism risks missing how engaged fan communities can use these elements as part of a process of world expansion and further research. In this way, they become possible vectors for increasing religious literacy in the sense of empathetic understandings of different faiths as lived experiences. Obviously not all fans *do* engage with them in this way. Particularly for fan authors, however, these elements represent one of many vectors in contemporary society towards religious literacy.

Notes

1. When capitalised here, ‘Church’ refers to a particular institution, e.g. the Roman Catholic Church. When used in lower case, ‘church’ refers to a specific congregation or place of worship. The capitalisation of ‘Church’ is not intended to suggest Christian normativity.

2. Fan fiction communities do sometimes engage in bitter and personal disagreement. However, the prevailing ethos of most is communal and supportive (see Stanfill 2017; Jones 2014).
3. 'Smut' is an author-applied tag to attract or warn readers about explicit content. These are *primarily* erotic and often feature little plot beyond the arrival of one of the characters and intercourse.
4. The line between 'fiction' and religion is often blurred. Religious texts can be studied as a form of fiction. Alternatively, fictional works might inspire ritual engagement with the supernatural (e.g. Davidsen 2016, 495–496) or be explored as sacred texts themselves (Cusack 2019, 21–24).
5. Other traditions advocate celibacy, including Anglo-Catholicism. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church is distinct in requiring it.
6. Their results show that only 46% of priests were certain that celibacy should remain a requirement for the priesthood. These figures are similar to surveys conducted in the United States and Britain in the 1970s and 1980s (see Loudon and Francis 2003, 5–8).

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